

COVID-19 Recovery Employer Toolkit

Part 2 - Supporting employees
within the workplace

August 2020

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COVID-19 Recovery Employer Toolkit

Part 2

Supporting employees within the workplace

Phase two: Return to the Workplace

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Introduction

At icare we are committed to supporting the Australian workforce (the businesses, communities and people) to build safe and sustainable workplaces.

Throughout 2020 the world has been forced to adapt as the effects of a global health pandemic, COVID-19, rippled through the economy, impacted physical, mental and social health and changed the future of work.

Any form of recovery or process of reintroduction of the workforce back to a version of 'normal', following a pandemic, needs to be managed with care and foresight to minimise the potential short-term and long-term health consequences.

We know that the process for the Australian workforce will not be:

- straightforward
- a one size fits all approach
- fast – it will be an ongoing process of recovery, as in years

Key findings from a literature review conducted by icare showed that the recovery process will occur in cycles and contain a combination of identifying risks and implementing protective strategies. It is important to note that whilst each individual's experience is unique it is expected that most will follow the below four-phased recovery process:

- pre-return to work
- **immediate**
- mid-term
- long term

This document addresses phase two (immediate) **protecting employees within the workplace (those working, have returned or returning)** as part of a pandemic recovery.

The document follows on from the COVID-19 Recovery Employer Toolkit Part 1. Part 1 focussed on preparing to return your employees to the workplace. Part 2 addresses areas for consideration to ensure the health and safety of employees once they have **returned to the workplace**. More specifically, the purpose of this document is to support the ongoing monitoring of health and safety practices to create a healthy workplace culture for you and your employees.

Employers are encouraged to use this document to identify their operational needs, which may have been impacted by the effects of COVID-19, to protect employees once they have returned to the workplace.

It is the reader's decision whether to adopt the recommended actions contained in this document.

What the research says

Employees facing changed work arrangements (e.g. returning to work from home or unemployment), will often display heightened emotional states, and may require employer support and guidance to minimise potential negative impacts. Research shows perceived poor employer support has the potential to lead to uncertainty, which can in turn erode trust in the employer. Research also shows that **managerial support, such as taking the time to check in with employees, providing good communication and acknowledging their employee experiences, can protect the employee's wellbeing.**

Therefore, it is highly recommended that employers make every possible effort to reduce employee risk perception. Employers can increase employee perception that the workplace is safe by using the following protective strategies:



Good leadership, consistent and clear communication and best practice support is integral to workplace reintegration and employee health and wellbeing. As businesses begin to reopen and employees are reintroduced into the workplace, repeating these three protective strategies during each phase of recovery is recommended.

To achieve the best outcomes to improve workplace practices and support your employees, we recommend implementation of your plan (COVID-19 Recovery Employer Toolkit - Part 1) prior to employees returning to the workplace. As COVID-19 recovery will be a long-term process it is necessary for ongoing review and continued mitigation of perceived risks (identified in Part 1) for your employees.

**Have you completed Part 1 (COVID-19 Recovery Employer Toolkit) workplace preparedness plan?
If not, please complete Part 1.**

Yes No

Action

By who

Date

The following checklists are to be used in conjunction with Part 1.

Toolkit 2 Roadmap

Pandemic Recovery for Mentally Healthy Workplaces

For your immediate recovery journey, we've created a roadmap to help navigate this toolkit.

Review

Review what you're already doing and have available. Collect relevant data, feedback received and existing policies, procedures and supports.

Toolkit ref: [A1, Part C](#)

Act

Bring your plan to life: share changes in your organisation, including clear leadership commitment, clear communication, and available support.

Throughout recovery, continue to review your process, cycling through the phases.

Plan

Update or develop an approach or action plan to address current risk and protective factors. This may include reviewing flexibility and other supports to help during COVID-19 recovery.

Toolkit ref: [A7, A8, A9, Part B, Part C](#), and review [A1](#)

Extra resources to help:

- Medium and larger businesses: [Developing a Workplace Mental Health Strategy](#)
- Small Business: [Actions for Small Business Owners and Workplace Wellbeing Plan template](#)
- [Design your own flexible working trial toolkit](#)

Reflect

Identify what your workforce needs. Healthy and safe workplaces protect against risks to mental health, build a positive workplace culture, and support their people. Participation, communication, and feedback are key to help identify risks and solutions.

Toolkit ref: [A5, A2, A3, A4, A6, Part C](#)

Extra resources to help:

- SafeWork Australia: [Mental health and COVID19](#)
- [COVID-19 Recovery and Mental Health at Work](#)
- [What makes a mentally healthy workplace?](#)
- [Good work design handbook](#)





Part A. Good Leadership Skills

It is important for leaders to understand the effects COVID-19 and the Australian Government's policies have had on their employees beyond the immediate risk of contagion. Employees may be experiencing heightened emotional states, due to the continued **perceived risk** to their health and safety. In addition employees are likely to be experiencing greater workloads and stress due to changed work conditions.

Behavioural awareness

Research suggests as a consequence of COVID-19 individuals are likely to experience behaviour change. This includes behavioural changes that may be experienced within the workplace including but not limited to:

- difficulty focussing
- workplace avoidance, i.e. absenteeism
- presenteeism, i.e. working whilst unwell, mentally or physically
- psychological distress, i.e. burn out, depression, anxiety, PTSD, hopelessness and suicide ideation
- increased interpersonal conflict, from within or outside the organisation, e.g. customers
- discrimination, stigmatisation and prejudice
- increased substance abuse (alcohol, tobacco and marijuana).

It is important to be aware of the flow on effects of these behaviours on your organisation. For instance, workplace avoidance can also increase workload for remaining employees with the potential to increase interpersonal conflict.

Leaders can **prevent significant behaviour change by addressing perceived risk and uncertainty. Actions undertaken by leaders to both raise awareness of, and address, behaviour change within the workplace can increase employees' ability to cope and reduce safety risks.** More specifically, leaders have the ability to reduce the risk of workplace injuries, including both physical and psychological.

Good leadership skills – Checklist for Employers

Policies and procedures

Workplaces should review existing policies in light of COVID-19 factoring in current risks and protective strategies.

A1. Have you reviewed and amended policies and procedures to support employees upon return to the workplace? Examples of types of policies to review, update or develop:	Yes	No
Access to mental health training e.g. mental health first aid	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Aggression in the workplace policy	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Awareness and access to health and wellbeing support services	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Awareness and access to mental health support services (to prioritise mental health support for employees)	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Bullying and harassment policy	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
COVID-19 workplace health and safety policy	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Diversity and inclusion policy (to address discrimination, stigmatisation and prejudice)	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Employee reward and recognition policy	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Flexible working policy (supporting work/life balance)	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Human Resource leave management policy (to address absenteeism or presenteeism)	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Job descriptions / role design (to provide high levels of role clarity and low levels of role conflict)	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Sick leave policy	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Workplace alcohol and other drugs policy (to mitigate increased risk of workplace injuries)	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No

Action

By who

Date

A positive and supportive workplace environment

Research has shown that creating a positive and supportive workplace environment is a protective factor for employees. COVID-19 has provided leaders an opportunity to reassess and address their workplace environment including current and pre-existing concerns (e.g. workplace bullying or harassment), to improve employee wellbeing and build future workplace sustainability. **Development and implementation of strong leadership can build the framework for a healthy, positive and supportive workplace.**

A2. Have you reflected on your current workplace environment and identified the key qualities and whether these will continue or can be improved on?

Yes No

Action

By who

Date

A3. Have you defined what a healthy and safe workplace environment means to your business (including behaviours that are acceptable/not acceptable)?

For support visit Heads Up [‘9 attributes of a healthy workplace’](#)

Yes No

Action

By who

Date

A4. Do you understand the barriers to successfully creating a healthy and safe workplace environment?

Mapping your employees workplace experiences may help you to identify barriers.

Yes No

Action

By who

Date

A5. Have you identified key employees that could form a committee to create accountability and engagement, in creating a healthy and safe workplace environment, from all areas of your business?

Yes No

Action

By who

Date

A6. Do you currently reward and reinforce the kinds of behaviours that support a healthy and safe workplace environment? If not, please see previous section 'Policies and Procedures'.

Yes No

Action

By who

Date

A7. Have you created the procedures, policies or systems to support your workplace environment?

If not, please see previous section 'Policies and Procedures'.

Yes No

Action

By who

Date

A8. Have you identified what support you may need to develop and implement your desired workplace environment?

Yes No

Action: please list what support you need

By who

Date

A9. Have you created a communication plan to help your employees understand the importance of a healthy and safe workplace, and how they can contribute to your desired workplace environment?

Yes No

Action

By who

Date



CONSISTENT AND
CLEAR
COMMUNICATION

Part B. Consistent and clear communication

Consistent and clear information provided to employees regarding workplace safety can assist in building a supportive workplace environment to combat employee uncertainty and fear. It is integral to address employees' risk perceptions within the workplace, as risk and fear can significantly impact behaviour and is a driver for underlying issues such as stigmatisation, discrimination, absenteeism, presenteeism and psychological distress.

Consistent and clear communication is necessary to assist employees upon return to the workplace. To ensure communication clarity, it is important to understand that employees may be impacted differently, and therefore communication strategies may need to reflect these potential differences.

For example some may feel overwhelmed which may limit their ability to concentrate or take on multiple tasks which may further impose safety risks. **Breaking down communication into clear, simple steps** can assist understanding in these circumstances.

Communication - Checklist for Employers

Communicate the environment to be safe and demonstrate every possible effort to ensure employee safety and reduce employee risk perception. Increase employees perception that the workplace is safe by ensuring your communications addresses:

B1. Have you communicated all policy or procedure changes to your employees (including new or COVID-19 specific policies or procedures)?

Yes No

Action: (please specify how)

By who

Date

B2. Have you communicated how policies and procedures will be implemented (including who will be responsible for implementation)?

Yes No

Action: (please specify who and how)

By who

Date

B3. Have you communicated how employees can report concerns with policies or procedures (including the implementation of policies and procedures)?

Yes No

Action: (please specify how)

By who

Date

B4. Have you communicated the early warning signs of identified COVID-19 effects to employees to increase awareness?

Yes No

Action: (please specify how)

By who

Date

B5. Have you communicated support services available to employees to address the early warning signs of identified COVID-19 effects?

Yes No

Action: (please specify how)

By who

Date

B6. Have you communicated how employees can report health and safety risks or concerns?

Yes No

Action: (please specify how)

By who

Date

Communicating a positive and supportive workplace environment

A positive and supportive workplace environment can be an effective method to prevent interpersonal conflict and division amongst employees (e.g. discrimination), resulting from COVID-19 behaviour change. Communicating your workplace environment to be inclusive (i.e. one team), and empowering each employee to be responsible for the workplace environment, can improve the health and wellbeing of employees and organisational factors (i.e. productivity and absenteeism). An unsupportive workplace environment and poor communication may be detrimental to the workplace, increasing the risk of physical and psychological injuries.

Workplaces should review and implement communication strategies to assist building a positive workplace environment.

B7. Have you communicated your desired workplace environment (including visible leadership support and buy in)?

Yes No

Action: (please specify how)

By who

Date

B8. Have you communicated acceptable and unacceptable workplace behaviours?

Yes No

Action: (please specify how)

By who

Date

B9. Have you communicated how employees can contribute as a team to create a healthy, positive and supportive workplace environment?

Yes No

Action: (please specify how)

By who

Date

B10. Have you communicated the importance of a positive and supportive workplace environment to your employees to increase awareness (including shared responsibility of all employees for creating the desired environment)?

Yes No

Action: (please specify how)

By who

Date

B11. Has your communication used language that is inclusive and accessible for employee diversity?

Yes No

Action: (please specify how)

By who

Date

B12. Has your communication used language that is clear, consistent and practical (including breaking down instructions into clear steps)?

Yes No

Action: (please specify how)

By who

Date

B13. Have you communicated how employees can raise workplace environment concerns?

Yes No

Action: (please specify how)

By who

Date

B14. Have you communicated how employee workplace environment concerns will be addressed (including open and ongoing feedback)?

Yes No

Action: (please specify how)

By who

Date

B15. Does your communication raise awareness and address stigmatisation within the workplace (mental health stigma, discrimination and stigma associated with raising concerns)?

Yes No

Action: (please specify how)

By who

Date

B16. Have you communicated available support services accessible by employees?	Yes	No
Some examples of methods of communication include:		
information presented as alerts, factsheets, pamphlets, posters and signage	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
emails or texts templates	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
a dedicated page on your business website	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
social media posts such as business Facebook pages or Yammer internally for employees	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
regular staff meetings in person, where appropriate, or video calls	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No

Action: (please specify how)

By who

Date

B17. Have you communicated to employees an awareness of potential COVID-19 specific impacts within the workplace, (including changes to customer behaviour and heightened emotions (e.g. increased customer aggression))?

[Learn about our Respect & Resilience program on the icare website.](#)

Yes No

Action: (please specify how)

By who

Date



Part C. Best Practice Support

As COVID-19 restrictions are lifted and employees return to the workplace, it is important to acknowledge the psychological effects employees may be experiencing as part of this process. For example, some employees are likely to experience excessive worry and/or anxiety due to their increased perceived risk as contact with others increases. These psychological effects may be compounded with other COVID-19 specific concerns i.e. financial stress and isolation impacts.

The COVID-19 Recovery Employer Toolkit - Part 1 addressed the importance of acknowledging and mitigating perceived risks around workplace safety (e.g. hygiene) to reduce the spread of infection. Part 1 mitigation support strategies are to be maintained while implementing part 2 strategies.

As people come together upon returning to the workplace, leader support is essential for employee psychological wellbeing. **Specifically, the provision of key information to assist employee coping is essential in creating a supportive workplace environment. It is also important to be aware of a greater need for support for leaders and supervisors.**

Research has highlighted psychological wellbeing concerns may be evident due to COVID-19. Awareness of these signs and symptoms is important to be able to provide the support that is needed. These include but are not limited to:

- anger
- anxiety
- detachment from others
- deteriorating work performance
- exhaustion
- financial distress

- insomnia
- interpersonal conflict / harassment / bullying
- irritability
- poor concentration and indecisiveness
- reluctance to work or consideration of resignation
- role conflict
- stigma / discrimination
- substance abuse.

Support is a significant protective factor, while a lack of support often indicates poor outcomes for both the employee and employer. Protective factors of employee psychological wellbeing includes managerial support (i.e. **approachable and sympathetic leaders**). More specifically, employers taking the time to check in (e.g. **communication and acknowledgment of experiences**) can positively impact employee perception of support and wellbeing. Encouraging employees' to seek support from friends and family can also provide protective effects on health and wellbeing.

Within the workplace it is important to address stigmas that may have been present prior to and as a result of COVID-19, these may include race, mental health, and work division (i.e. essential workers versus non-essential workers and working from home versus the workplace). Stigma and discrimination in the workplace can lead to significant collapse of work teams, and therefore **awareness should be increased, issues addressed, and support provided.**

C1 Best Practice Support – Resources for Employers

icare NSW

[icare's coronavirus \(COVID-19\) information](#)

Staying connected

[icare Social connections toolkit](#)

Local health services

Find local health services nationally via [Health Direct](#)

Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service

[Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service](#) free call 1800 512 348, webchat or visit online coronavirus.beyondblue.org.au.

The service includes free brief counselling support from mental health professionals, advice on accessing available local and COVID-19 support servi.e. and digital content.

E-interventions and screening

[The Anxiety and Depression Checklist: K10](#)
[Black Dog Institute: The Online Clinic](#)
[Smiling Mind](#)
[HeadGear](#) from Black Dog Institute

Small Business

[Resources from Beyond Blue](#)
[Ahead for Business](#) from Everymind

Building mentally healthy workplaces

[Developing a workplace mental health strategy: a how-to guide for organisations](#)

[Heads Up from Beyond Blue: Better mental health in the workplace](#)

[Workplace Mental Health Toolkit from the Black Dog Institute](#)

[Psychosocial Ergonomic Checklist – Building Healthy Workspaces Virtually](#)

Communicating safely about mental health

[RUOK: How to have a conversation at work](#)

Free online training: [mental health conversations](#)

Mental health communication resources (including templates) from Beyond Blue are available [here](#)

Safe discussion of mental health, suicide and drugs and alcohol: [Mindframe Guidelines](#)

Safe discussion of suicide prevention and suicide: [Conversations matter](#)

icare speakers program

[icare Paralympian Speakers Program](#) – tailored presentations by Paralympians focusing on the importance of workplace health and safety

Information in this document is based on the literature review entitled *The effects of public health events (epidemics and pandemics) on workforce sustainability*. To read the full research report, please visit the icare website: www.icare.nsw.gov.au/news-and-stories/workforce-sustainability- COVID-19-recovery

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This content was created by the icare Research team, with special thanks to RISE Research Team at Griffith University, on 9 July 2020. Subject matter advice has also been provided from Beyond Blue, with resources contributing from Beyond Blue, the Black Dog Institute, Everymind, RU OK? and Smiling Mind. *Whilst we encourage you to use this content we ask that you please keep the content as close to the original as possible and cite references where appropriate.*



The COVID-19 RECOVERY EMPLOYER TOOLKIT - PART 3 will address:
Phase three: Mid Term (3-6 months following return to the workplace)

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